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Colorado to probe underground fire Work aims to cool source of Coal Seam blaze

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David Frey Special to The Denver Post

GLENWOOD SPRINGS - State officials want to investigate the underground blaze sparked this summer's Coal Seam fire to see if the flames - burning for nearly a century - can be cooled or put out.

Division of Minerals and Geology representatives plan to meet with interested contractors Tuesday to discuss a project to drill a dozen holes into the ridge in Snake Canyon, five miles west of Glenwood, to see how big and hot the underground fire is. If officials find it could be abated and money can be secured, the abandoned coal could be filled with a mixture of firefighting foam and special cement.

Process used in East

"It's probably their best shot," said Rick Balogh, project manager for the U.S. Interior Department's Office of Surface Mining in Pittsburgh.

Balogh said he's used the process about five times, and in each case it succeeded in at least cooling the flames. The procedure is popular in Pennsylvania and Kentucky, where underground fires are common, he said.

State officials plan to review bids Oct. 8.

"We've been interested in it for a while," said Steve Renner, the division's project manager in Grand Junction, "mainly because of its proximity to human use of the land. Our main thrust has always been human health and safety. The last thing you need is someone to fall in or walk across a burning area."

He said that examining the underground blaze was planned before the Coal Seam fire. The county remains skeptical.

Hikers and partiers frequent South Canyon. The fire below, burning in what was Canyon Mine No. 1, dates back at least to 1910. It is one of 29 underground fires state.

On June 8, it ignited tinder-dry vegetation on the surface, sparking the Coal Seam that has burned more than 12,000 acres, destroyed 29 West Glenwood homes, forced evacuation of about 3,000 people and became the nation's top-priority fire for a day. The Coal Seam fire still burns in the Flat Tops north of Glenwood.

County officials said they question whether the fire can be doused, but welcome effort.

"It's extremely dangerous and there's no guarantee, but I think it's worth looking at," Garfield County Commissioner John Martin said.

In 1995, the state funded a project to plug a vent at South Canyon, filling the 60-foot wide crater with a balloon and covering it with concrete, in an effort to battle the fire. After the Coal Seam fire, former federal mining engineer Gary Colaizzi criticized the effort for not going far enough to prevent a wildfire.

His Lakewood company, Goodson and Associates, specializes in sealing off coal seams with foaming cement and was passed over for the work.

After briefly reviewing bid documents last week, Colaizzi also criticized the latest proposal, saying drilling would be costly and may yield little information.

"I think they'd be better off taking a look at it from the surface and seeing what they could do to prevent a forest fire," he said.

Colaizzi said he doubts his firm will bid on the project, in part because the company lacks deep-drilling equipment.

Dangerous conditions

The proposal calls for six 4-inch-wide holes 600 feet deep, and another six holes 2 feet deep, across 1,500 feet of the ridge, requiring helicopters to reach steeper terrain. Working amid volcano-like conditions of dangerous vents and 900-degree temperatures, crews would install devices to measure temperatures and gas emissions.

The results could lead to crews returning with fire-retardant foam to cool the flames and cement grout to seal cracks and cut off the air supply. The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management said the process can be useful in places such as South Canyon, where coal seam fires are steep and deep.

Officials said they're examining mine fires throughout the state, including those in Garfield, Moffat, Rio Blanco, Mesa, Delta, Jackson, Fremont, Routt and Boulder counties. But the South Canyon project is the only one with grant money available. The state has tried to tackle mine fires in the region before. Several years ago, the division contracted with Colaizzi's firm to treat a fire at the abandoned IHI mine at Rifle Gap, part of the same mine complex.

Officials say that fire cooled but still burns.



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